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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001528

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SUBJECT: THAILAND: SOUTH DEVELOPMENTS UPDATE, MARCH 2, 2005

REF: BANGKOK 1375

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Clarke. Reason: 1.4(d)

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Thai Government has moved rapidly away from Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's controversial plan to allocate economic assistance based on the color coded security ratings of villages in the southern border provinces. In the face of broad condemnation of the zoning scheme, and with serious violence still occurring on a daily basis, Thaksin is now focusing on creation of a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), headed by former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun. Separately, 25 Members of Parliament, tasked by Thaksin to seek solutions to the southern crisis, made a one day visit to the south. Southern Muslims are skeptical about the purposes of the visit. Finally, a public speech by Privy Councilor Prem, during which he urged the government to follow a "royal approach" to the south, appears to have gotten Thaksin's attention. END SUMMARY

NO "ZONES" IN THE SOUTH AFTER ALL, INSTEAD "RECONCILIATION"

2. (SBU) Prime Minister Thaksin appears to be retreating quickly from his February 16 announcement that the RTG would cut off government funding for "red" zone villages which the government believed were supporting militants because of a high level of violence in surrounding areas. The plan has been roundly criticized in Thailand for its potential to further alienate the local population in the deep South. In an apparent attempt to back away from the announced program Thaksin's spokesman, Jakrapob Penkair, told the media on February 25 that the allocation or denial of assistance funds based on the classification of villages into green, yellow and red zones was merely a "concept," and not yet a policy.

3. (U) The zoning scheme dropped out of the news when the Thaksin administration sharply shifted its focus to creation of a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) to look for ways to address the conflict in the south. On February 28, Thaksin announced that the government was establishing a 30-member commission to examine long-term solutions to the crisis. Thaksin tapped former prime minister Anand Panyarachun to lead the commission. (Note: Anand is one of the most respected public figures in Thailand. He was twice appointed interim prime minister in 1991-92 during the political crisis stemming from the 1991 coup. He recently chaired a UN High-level Commission on Reform. End Note.) Thaksin said he wanted a diverse group of participants on the commission, even naming several of the most vocal critics of his southern policy as possible members.

4. (U) Anand is now recruiting commission members. The panel will reportedly include representatives from state agencies, academia, NGOs, politicians (including members of the opposition Democratic Party) and religious leaders. Anand will serve as the NRC Chairman with Bavornasak Uvanno, a close Thaksin confidant and current cabinet secretary general, serving as the NRC's secretary-general. Other possible commission members who have been discussed include the noted social critic Dr. Prawase Wasi; Phiphop Thongchai, a prominent human rights activist; and Surichai Wankaew, Chairman of the NGO Campaign for Popular Democracy.

5. (SBU) The opposition Democrat Party (DP) has taken a cooperative stance towards the creation of the commission. Abhisit Vejjajiva, who has taken the reigns of the party following the DP's drubbing at the polls during the February 6 nationwide elections, confirmed that his party would be willing to cooperate with the NRC. Abhisit told visiting NIO Dr. James Shinn and Poloff on March 2 that he expected former Prime Minister Anand would play an important role in solving the southern problem and said that he was looking for more details on the commission's structure, membership, and mission. Former Prime Minister and DP elder statesman Chuan Leekpai also welcomed the commission, offering his cooperation.

PARLIAMENT TAKES ON THE SOUTH

6. (U) Thaksin also dispatched 25 Thai Rak Thai (TRT) MPs, under the leadership of Deputy Prime Minister Suwat Liptaphanlop, to the southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat for a one-day fact-finding trip on February

28. The Thaksin plan assigns one MP to each of the 25

districts in the deep south so the MP can learn in depth about local concerns of the populace in his assigned district. Locals have greeted the visit of the MPs with skepticism. In a typical reaction, Mimanase Sama-ari, Vice Chairman of the Young Muslim Association of Thailand, called the one-day southern trip a publicity stunt and a waste of time.

17. (U) Meanwhile, a Thaksin spokesman confirmed that a extraordinary joint session of the House of Representatives and the Senate (reftel) will take place March 30-31. The rare session, which will focus exclusively on the South, has been welcomed by pro-democracy activists as an opportunity to publicly discuss the government's policy.

#### PRIVY COUNCIL TAKES PUBLIC ROLE ON SOUTH

18. (U) During a February 28 conference at the prestigious Thammasat University General Prem Tinsulanonda, president of the Privy Council and former prime minister, called for the government to follow the King's advice on dealing with the south. Prem urged the Thaksin government to follow the rule of law, and called for better understanding of the southern population. Privy Councilor Kasem Wattanachai also spoke at the same conference, echoing Prem's remarks. Kasem called on the government to head the King's advice, and work on improving the lives and livelihoods of the people in the south. On March 1 Prime Minister Thaksin had a closed door 50 minute "courtesy call" meeting with General Prem. Thaksin did not comment on the specifics of the meeting, saying publicly that he and the Privy Councilor had only discussed general issues, and had not focused on any specific issues.

19. (C) Comment: It is not surprising that Thaksin is backing away from his ill-conceived plan to punish or reward "zones" in the south given widespread condemnation of the idea. Once again, he is demonstrating how agile a politician he can be in the face of opposition. However, it remains unclear whether these latest replacement initiatives are just maneuvering or amount to a real attempt to consider different options for the South. Despite the selection of former Prime Minister Anand, one of the most respected public figures in Thailand, to head the National Reconciliation Commission, the prospects that the Commission will come up with anything too new or original for the South are mixed. Anand himself has said his views on how to end the violence do not differ greatly from the government's. And Thaksin loyalist Bavornask Uvanno is in the other NRC leadership position. Nevertheless, if the NRC final membership is extended to real critics of Thaksin's southern strategy, they may be able to force a new consensus. Local southern skepticism over the involvement of outsider members of parliament in the South seems warranted. It is unlikely that the 25 TRT MPs, the majority of whom come from the majority Buddhist north of the country, will be able to relate sufficiently rapidly and sincerely to the culture and concerns of southerners. Their expressed desire to help is already being dismissed by many Southerners as a political gesture. Of greater interest are the public statements by the two members of the Privy Council. Prem's comments in particular deserve attention as they likely represent direct concern from the Palace over the government's hard-line southern policy. End Comment.

BOYCE